

“Rest”

Psalm 23: 1-2; Matthew 11: 29-30

We continue our Sabbath conversation with the word “Rest”. You may have noticed that I picked out a few Scriptures that are more familiar which mention the word, “rest”. This is the Bible Nerd coming out for a moment but did you know that the word “rest” is used 274 times in the OT and fifty-two times in the NT. It is usually mentioned in the context of support or peace such as in the Matthew text. And it is usually connected more often than not, with the presence of God, such as in our psalm for the day. All times the word “rest” is mentioned, either in Hebrew or Greek, this word can be translated into what we understand it to be today, that peaceful existence where all things are made well with our soul. Even when God extends the promise to the Israelites of a place to put down their roots, it is described as “The Lord God is providing you a place of rest, place of peace, a place where you will not have to go to war. The promise land is described as a place where the Spirit of God will dwell in and among the people of God.

So, this got me to thinking... If a particular word, like “rest” is mentioned so many times in our Bible, mentioned so many times in the story that forms us into the people of God, don’t you think it is kind of important, something we should probably sit up and take notice, something we should probably enact in our lives as

a sign of our faith? But somehow, we ignore this basic gift, a gift given to us by our God, a gift modeled to us by our God, a gift given to us by our God to provide us healing and wholeness. Knowing how many times the word “rest” is referenced in our faith story, don’t you think it is something we should be noticing or at least noticing the effects of the lack of implementing such a gift in our lives?

It is interesting to me that the same week we are talking about rest, I stumble across a TED talk about importance of getting a good’s night’s sleep. I’m not going to go into details but the basic premise of this guy’s talk was that modern day neuroscientists have discovered that over 2000 years ago when a particular philosopher posed a theory about the need for long hours of rest for our brains, the philosopher was actually right. Sure, he missed exactly how the brain worked because he didn’t have modern medicine but this philosopher’s basic premise that our brains need rest to remove the bad stuff from our bodies was actually right.

In this TED talk, the neuroscientists discovered that rest is the body’s way, the brain’s way of removing all the cell waste that can build up and block important pathways. And that if our brains don’t get enough rest, if our bodies don’t get enough rest, this bad stuff can build up and is theorized to contribute to brain disorders such as Alzheimer’s.

The neuroscientist goes on to say that there needs to be more research done on this but isn't it amazing to think about that a lesson human kind knew about some 2000 years ago, a lesson that we seem to have forgotten about as such an advanced society, isn't it amazing to think that a lesson that has such important implications for how we live our lives now can be as simple as doing something we know we should already be doing anyway. Seems almost theological doesn't it?

Almost like God knew what God was doing when God gave us the word about remembering the Sabbath, when God gave us the gift of rest, when God modeled for us how to be restful in the midst of life and chaos.

As I have lived with this image of God being our Shepherd all week, I noticed that the very first thing we are told is that we shall not want. This is quickly followed up by the verse, "He makes me lay down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." From the very start, we are told God provides everything we need to live. Notice I didn't say survive. I said that God has given us everything we need to live as beloved children of God made whole, including the gift of rest. From the very beginning of our story, God invites us to come to the place where the Spirit of God dwells in and among the people of God and find rest.

Now when I say the word rest in this context, I'm not talking about the rest we sometimes take, you know when we come in, all tired from work or worn out from life's craziness, those moments when we come in, prop our feet up on the coffee table, and sit down in front of the TV, those moments when we find ourselves saying, "I'm just going to sit here for five minutes and rest."

I don't know about you but when I do that, I feel worse than I did before. My mind goes numb. I become a couch potato. I feel completely disoriented. Then when I finally do find the energy to drag myself away from the TV, drag myself off that couch which seems to have grown these magic suction cups that grip me with iron jaws, I feel more worn out than when I first sat down.

That is not rest. And it is certainly not the rest I'm talking about or that God calls us to take when God extends the offer to lay down beside still waters. The rest I'm talking about, the one described in Psalm 23, the very rest that Jesus offers to us is the rest that restores our souls, the rest that becomes pathways to renewing our spirits. The type of rest I'm talking about is the rest that can only be experienced when we reconnect to the presence of God in our midst.

Or let me say it a different way. Spiritual author, Evelyn Underhill says that we spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to have, to want, and to do. [We go about] Craving, clutching, and fussing. [We do this in all aspects of our lives:

material, political, social, emotional, intellectual, even religious. We are kept in [a state of] perpetual unrest, forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in the fundamental verb, to Be, and that Being, not wanting, not having, not doing, but being is the essence of the spiritual life.

Let me say that again: Being, not wanting, not having, not doing, but being is the essence of the spiritual life.

As people of faith, our fundamental verb is to be...to be in relationship with God, to be in relationship with others, to be a light in the darkness, to be a sanctuary of quiet rest, to be a beloved child of God made whole.

And it is this God-given gift of rest that allows us to be all these things. It is what our brains need. It is what our bodies need. It is what our spirits crave. This gift of rest is what reminds us that we are so much more than all the labels that are placed upon us by the outside world. This God-given gift of rest is what allows our souls to become healed and made whole.

As people of faith, we are called to be restful by living in the present moment, by letting go of the negativity of the past, and by not feeling anxious about the future. We are called to be attentive to the present moment because that

is when and where God shows up! It is only when we step back from the pressures, it is only when we lay down our burdens, it is only when we stop and say, "God, you've got this because I cannot," that we can truly open our hearts to receive joy, to receive love and life, that we can truly find the rest that restores our souls.

Because when we get to that place of genuine rest, that place where the Spirit of God dwells in and among the people of God, that is when we reconnect to the well spring of living waters which is the source of our life.

There is a story about a community who discovered a well years ago. Year after year, they would come to this well, drink from its waters, lie beside its still waters. They came to this well to rest. Then when it was time and they needed to return to their busy, hectic lives, they felt healed. They knew that it was this well filled with the living water that had made them whole.

That is until one day, someone said, "This well is so important. Let's build a building around it." So they did. They built a building, a cathedral really, filled with beautiful stained windows and gorgeous artwork. Everything about this building, the image it presented to the world was perfect. However in building this beautiful facade, this community closed off their connection to this healing rest filled well. Years passed and the people forgot all about that well. That is until someone noticed that the foundation of their beautiful cathedral was crumbling.

When they looked around at their old building, when they looked at it other, they noticed something was missing. The light streaming in through the stained windows didn't seem to shine as brightly as it used to and the gorgeous art seemed gray and gloomy. As they looked around, they realized that this beautiful cathedral, this beautiful façade that they presented to the world was just a shell of its former self.

Then... in the quiet, in the stillness of that moment, someone heard the dripping of water. They grabbed their flashlights and traveled down into the caverns, down into the catacombs that were underneath their beautiful cathedral façade. And what do you think they discovered...that well, that well they had all forgotten about, that well they had only heard about in stories from generations past. They discovered that well everyone thought didn't exist.

So the community got to work, breaking down the walls that prevented them from reaching this life-giving well. They started breaking down the barriers that they themselves had erected to keep others out. And what do you think they did after removing that outer shell, after dismantling this beautiful façade, after taking off this picture perfect image they presented to the world.

They drank from the well. They drank from its waters. They took their rest beside its still waters. They drank from the wellspring of the living waters and once

again, became reconnected with the gift that restored their souls, this gift that invited them to be beloved children of God, made whole.

As people of faith, we have been given a gift, the gift of rest. May we find the courage and the strength to embrace this gift in our lives so that we can find the healing and wholeness that we and our world so desperately needs. Amen.